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Central Intelligence Agency



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Japan: New Direction for the Socialists? []

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Summary

When Masashi Ishibashi became chairman of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) in September 1983, he took charge of a sharply divided party struggling to hold its own with the Japanese voters. His response was to call for a "new start" for the nation's largest opposition party and to make improving ties to the United States as well as other foreign policy initiatives, the centerpiece of his effort to moderate the JSP's leftist image. He has made some progress but must continue to perform a balancing act between the party's left and right wings. He must also avoid moving the party so close to the center that it loses its identity. []

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A New Image

Ishibashi's efforts to boost his party's image have been driven by a need to reverse declining party membership and to improve the JSP's lackluster performance in recent Diet elections. The party lost 16 seats in 1979 and made no gains in

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the 1980 election. The influence of the far left on party policy has limited the JSP's popular appeal, and factional infighting between the powerful leftist Socialism Association and the increasingly vocal right wing has sapped its strength. In attempting to rejuvenate the party, Ishibashi has turned first to the highly visible foreign policy arena, where he hopes to demonstrate his abilities as a statesman and his party's ability to play a responsible international role. [REDACTED]

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JSP Opens Door to the United States

Recognizing that moves toward the United States would appeal to a public that has consistently rated US-Japan relations high, Ishibashi has made JSP ties to Washington the focus of his new foreign policy approach. During President Reagan's visit to Japan last November, Ishibashi toned down JSP rhetoric, hoping to pave the way for a visit to the United States. When he did visit last April, Ishibashi stressed JSP interest in close relations with the United States. At the same time, in order to appease leftist members and supporters, he was careful to identify areas of disagreement both with Washington and with Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) management of the relationship. On defense, for example, he reaffirmed JSP policy that Japan should be a nonaligned and unarmed nation and expressed opposition to Japan's defending its sealanes to a distance of 1,000 nautical miles.

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Ishibashi's overtures to the United States have paid off with extensive media coverage and favorable public reaction, which will probably encourage him to pursue closer relations. Other JSP Dietmen seem prepared to follow suit. The US-Japan interchange committee, established within the party after Ishibashi's Washington trip, has attracted a large membership. Highly respected party vice chairman Takako Doi heads the committee and also serves as the JSP representative on a newly formed suprapartisan Japan-US Parliamentarians League. [REDACTED]

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Balancing the Chinese-Soviet Relationship

Also with an eye to the electorate, Ishibashi has attempted to thread a path between the left and right wings of the party in managing JSP relations with Japan's two major neighbors. Under the influence of the Socialism Association, the JSP until recently has leaned toward the Soviet Union. Ishibashi has been associated with the pro-Soviet faction, but shortly after taking office last year he traveled to China. According to the Japanese press he plans to travel to the Soviet Union by next spring to counterbalance the China trip and improve the relationship that cooled after the KAL incident. He will probably face objections

[redacted]

from the JSP right wing, however, which has stepped up opposition to the USSR in recent months. In August, for example, a report published by a party committee dominated by the right wing for the first time criticized Soviet deployment of SS-20s. [redacted]

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Ties to the Two Koreas

Ishibashi's efforts to serve as a mediator between the two Koreas are designed to appeal to both wings of the party and to demonstrate that as JSP leader he can play an international role that the LDP, with its Western ties, cannot. In September Ishibashi led a JSP delegation to P'yongyang to exchange views with government and party officials on Japanese-North Korean relations and the Korean Peninsula. Kim Il-song told Ishibashi the North was ready to begin fisheries negotiations, ending a longstanding stalemate "private" LDP efforts had failed to break. A new agreement was signed on 15 October. Kim also kept his comments on Japan more conciliatory than usual. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Ishibashi also has made some cautious moves toward South Korea. The JSP opposed President Chun's visit to Japan in early September, but Ishibashi toned down criticism of the trip in hopes of leaving the door open for JSP-South Korean consultations. Just before Chun's visit, in fact, the JSP announced its willingness to initiate exchanges with South Korean religious and civil rights groups. Rightwing Socialists support these overtures toward the South, but Ishibashi can only take further steps with an eye to the left wing. [redacted]

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Broadening Party Support

Before the lower house elections last December Ishibashi hinted at more realistic policies on the Self-Defense Forces and cooperation with the more moderate Komeito. These moves were designed to broaden popular support by emphasizing changes taking place within his party. The JSP in fact gained several seats although, ironically, they were won by leftwingers and may have been more the result of poor planning by the LDP and disillusionment with the ruling party's record on political ethics than of Ishibashi's new approach. Nevertheless, Ishibashi

[redacted]

was able to take credit for the election gains and to lead the JSP convention in February from a position of strength. At that meeting he won several changes in the party platform:

- The party recognized the legality of the Self-Defense Forces, although the left wing insisted on continuing to describe them as "unconstitutional."
- The platform also stated for the first time in a JSP official policy document that Japan and the United States have vital economic relations. Ishibashi was quick to point out, however, that JSP economic policies toward the United States were not the same as the LDP's. [redacted]

In addition to moderating the party's platform, Ishibashi has made other attempts to broaden support for the JSP. The press has reported on several occasions his call for a JSP-Komeito-Democratic Socialist Party relationship, and he has met with the chairman of Komeito to coordinate policy on such topics as disarmament. Ishibashi scored a public relations victory for his "new" Socialist Party with a well-publicized meeting at which JSP Diet members, big business leaders, and conservatives exchanged ideas. [redacted]

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Prospects

Ishibashi has moved quickly to make good on his promise to change the JSP, and several successes as well as media attention probably will encourage him to continue. The next steps are likely to prove more difficult than those taken over the past year:

- Removing outdated Marxist-Leninist rhetoric from the party platform could help broaden the JSP's appeal, but the left wing may block such action at the next party convention as it did in February.
- The LDP probably will plan more effectively for the next national election, which will make it a more difficult test of how well the Japanese public is responding to the JSP's new image.
- Attempts by Ishibashi to push ahead on Korea could tip the delicate balance between left and right in the party. According to Embassy sources, rightwing members of the party are "cool" to Ishibashi's initiatives toward North Korea and have accused him of conducting "one-man diplomacy." Not wanting to fuel factional infighting before the JSP convention in January, Ishibashi probably will hold off taking major steps on either Korea. [redacted]

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[redacted]

Ishibashi will probably press for increased dialogue with the United States and with offers to serve as a channel between Washington and P'yongyang and a mediator on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, Socialist protests over issues such as US deployment of Tomahawk missiles in the Pacific will probably continue, as Ishibashi will want to maintain an identity distinct from the centrist opposition parties. [redacted]

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